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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 000281

SIPDIS

STATE FOR DRL/IRF, DRL/NESCA AND NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [IR](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: MOROCCO'S ANTI-SHI'A CAMPAIGN: IRAQIS TARGETED,
CIVIL SOCIETY MOBILIZES

REF: A. RABAT 0200

[B](#). RABAT 0205

[C](#). CASABLANCA 0047

[D](#). RABAT 0230

[E](#). RABAT 0265

Classified By: CDA Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) Summary: The Government of Morocco's campaign against Moroccan Shi'a appears to have abated after delivering a strong message to Islamic activists. The campaign included confiscation of Shi'a books and interrogation of some Shi'a leaders. Civil society is beginning to publicly criticize the campaign, which has led to a marked decrease in anti-Shi'a activity. The Iraqi Charge d'Affaires (CDA) told our Charge that the closure of an Iraqi school in connection with the pressure campaign came as a surprise to school administrators and the Iraqi Embassy. He speculated that the parental complaint of Shi'a proselytizing that sparked an inspection may have been instigated by the GOM. He also requested U.S. assistance in divining GOM intentions. However, a GOM official reiterated that King Mohammed VI himself saw growing Shi'a influence as an existential threat and may have been worried about Moroccan Shi'a in Europe. While GOM motivation remains subject to debate, we will continue to engage interlocutors and urge the Department to raise this issue with senior GOM officials. End Summary.

Background

[2](#). (SBU) On March 6, the GOM announced a severing of relations with Iran, ostensibly over Iranian statements on Bahraini sovereignty and other criticisms of Morocco (Refs A-C). On March 18, the media reported that the Government had launched an officially sanctioned pressure campaign against Shi'a in Morocco, seizing Shi'ite tracts from bookstores and libraries, and mobilizing imams to preach against Shi'ite influences. A variety of sources indicated a broad dragnet was sweeping up individuals known or suspected of being Shi'a adherents (Ref D). Later conversations with human rights lawyers indicated that approximately 15 leaders of Shi'a associations were questioned by police but then released without charges. On March 22, the Ministry of Education shut down a private Iraqi school, affiliated with the Iraqi Islamist D'Awah Party, catering to Iraqi emigres and hundreds of Moroccan children. The sudden closure came after allegations that the school was teaching Shi'ite principles, a charge the principal denies. On March 28, five Western missionaries were expelled from Morocco for proselytizing after they were found conducting a Bible study in a private apartment (Ref E).

The Iraqi School - Mechanics of A Pressure Campaign

¶3. (C) In a meeting with Charge on March 30, Iraqi Charge d'Affaires Rast Nouri Shawis (protect) said that the Iraqi school closure came as a complete surprise to both school officials and the Iraqi Embassy. The chain of events began in early March when the Moroccan Ministry of National Education (MOE) announced its intention to visit and "check the school's methods;" with actual inspections taking place on March 19 and 20. Despite inspectors' compliments to school officials on how the it was being run, the MOE abruptly announced its closure on the morning of March 21, while classes were in session. The MOE asserted that school officials had not obtained a license to operate in Morocco when the institution opened in 1977, and the school, therefore, was an illegal entity.

¶4. (SBU) The school's 480 students are roughly ten percent Iraqi, 80 percent Moroccan, and ten percent from other Middle Eastern countries. While the school is affiliated with the Iraqi Shi'a D'Awah party, it is funded exclusively through tuition, although the headmaster's salary is paid by the Iraqi Government. The majority of the teachers, including the headmaster, are Sunni, according to Shawis.

¶5. (SBU) Despite school officials' attempts to obtain a operating license subsequent to the closing, and an appeal to at least keep the school open until the end of the school

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year in May, the MOE insisted on an immediate closure. Strangely, the MOE subsequently offered to allow teaching to continue in a different building for the remainder of the year, provided the name of the school, i.e., The Iraqi Baghdad School was not used and its headmaster be removed. (Note: Parents and students, who subsequently protested the closure, collectively rejected this offer. End Note.)

¶6. (SBU) Shawis said that the initial inspection may have been prompted by complaints from a parent, a Middle East Broadcasting television correspondent, who asserted that his three children attending the school had been verbally and physically pressured to adopt Shi'a teachings - a charge Shawis called false. While denying that the closure was directly related to the break in Iranian relations, Shawis allowed, given the high profile nature of the parent's complaints, i.e., use of the internet, etc., that the parent's actions may have been encouraged by the GOM as part of a broader strategy. The headmaster and teachers have hired a lawyer and petitioned a local court to keep the school open; a decision is pending the case. Shawis requested embassy help in soliciting a clear answer from the GOM on what its intentions and expectations are regarding the school.

Civil Society and the Media Speak Out ...

¶7. (SBU) The centrist Moroccan Organization for Human Rights (French acronym OMDH) distributed a strongly worded statement in Arabic critical of the government pressure campaign. At its core, the statement highlighted the fact that the GOM has signed international agreements guaranteeing freedom of religion. The document also underscored that Article 6 of the Moroccan Constitution enshrines Islam as the state religion and charges the state with protecting its practice. The statement was unusual in that the OMDH is close to the Palace, making its direct criticism especially piquant. The leftist Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) has made similar statements, also focusing on the constitutional aspect.

¶8. (SBU) In a private conversation with PolOff at OMDH's annual congress on March 27, Abdelaziz Nouyaidi (protect), a prominent human rights attorney, asked for direct embassy intervention to convince the GOM to change course. In a subsequent April 3 conversation, Nouyaidi said that the government campaign appeared to be slowing, although he encouraged continued USG back-channel pressure.

¶9. (SBU) A series of articles in major print and media outlets either directly or implicitly criticized the campaign. One in the French-language weekly Le Journal, asked, "What's next?" "Christians, Jews, a hunt for sorcerers?" and proceeded to assail the government's case by citing the Moroccan Constitution's protection of religion.

... And the Government Counters

¶10. (C) Abdelaziz Taleb (protect), the secular Chief of Staff to the Secretary General of Government (SG) (a ministerial-level position combining attributes of the White House Chief of Staff and Office of Management and Budget Director) cautioned Emboffs on April 2 not to mistake Morocco's religious tolerance for weakness. He said the King saw increasing Shi'ite activity in Morocco as a direct challenge to his religious authority, as well as an existential security threat. Taleb also alluded to pressure from European countries which were worried about Moroccan Shi'ites being radicalized by Iranians in Morocco before being sent north to join an approximately 20,000 other Moroccan Shi'ites in Europe to "create trouble." His comments reflect what we hear from diplomats in Rabat as well.

¶11. (C) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Chief of Staff Nasser Bourita told PolCouns on April 2 that recent events were a deliberate government policy focused on a security, not religious, threat. OMDH President Amina Bouyach told PolCouns on April 2 that Iran and Shi'ites were active on campuses, and contributed to the GOM's sense of worry. She also suspected that the campaign was obliquely directed at

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dissident Islamic group Adl wa Ihsan (Justice and Good Works Organization or JCO) (Ref C), which has been making noises about seeking more legitimate political status.

¶12. (C) Comment: The events leading up to the Iraqi school closure appear to indicate that it was part of a broader strategy that may have been in planning for a period of time. Civil society criticism and expressions of puzzlement are encouraging. OMDH's reliance on the Moroccan Constitution and international conventions to which the GOM is a signatory afford a solid and effective way to make an argument for a return to tolerance. We will continue to engage the GOM vigorously on this issue. If the GOM is intending to send a message to Islamist conservatives, this is a blunt and coarse way in which to do it. We recommend the Department prepare contingency guidance in case of a press inquiry and raise the crackdown in conversations with GOM officials (see proposed points in Ref D). End Comment.

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Jackson